

No Distance Can Separate Two Hearts

By Faye Hovey,

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ALL of us have felt the suffering of being separated from someone important to us. In “The Drum at the Gate of Thunder,” Nichiren Daishonin praises a woman follower, Sennichi-ama, for her abiding faith, and reminds us that no distance can separate two hearts.

This fictionalized insight into Sennichi-ama’s life and feelings reflects my own picture of what it must have been like for her, “a mere woman” in old Japan, to encounter someone like the Daishonin. In this story, I have used my own imagination to give this woman disciple a voice.

For me, the Daishonin’s letters are like doorways to those times and it is possible to be “of one heart” over time and space with any of the fascinating people that were a part of his life. Imagine, if you will, the kind of human revolution it took to become a follower of the Daishonin during those times. Without the poetry and graceful imagery provided by his letters, filled with kindness, consideration, stern advice and compassion, we would never know them—people just like us, in troubled times similar to our own; people we encounter every time we read one of his writings.

“The Drum at the Gate of Thunder”

A WOMAN who embraces the lion king of the Lotus Sutra need not fear the beasts of Hell, Hunger and Animality. All the offenses committed by a woman in her lifetime are like dry grass, and the single character *myo* of the Lotus Sutra is like a small spark. When a small spark is set to a large expanse of grass, not only the grass but also big trees and large stones will all be consumed. Such is the power of the fire of wisdom in the single character *myo*....

It is a thousand *ri* across the sea and mountains from Sado to this province. You, as a woman, have held fast to your faith in the Lotus Sutra; and over the years you have repeatedly sent your husband here to visit me in your place. Surely, the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni, Taho and all other Buddhas of the ten directions know of your devotion. For example, though the moon is forty thousand *yojana* high in the heavens, its reflection appears instantly in a pond on the earth; and the sound of the drum at the Gate of Thunder is immediately heard, ten million *ri* in the distance. Though you remain in Sado, your heart has come to this province.

The way of attaining Buddhahood is just like this. Although we live in the impure land, our minds reside at Eagle Peak. Merely seeing each other’s face would in itself be insignificant. What matters is one’s heart. Someday let us meet at Eagle Peak, where Shakyamuni Buddha dwells. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, pp. 288-89)

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Sennichi-ama: My Story

WHAT is enlightenment? What does this mean to me, a woman? A mere woman they would say in my day is unfit for anything other than child-bearing and the keeping of the house. But enlightenment? This I have always known but kept closely to my heart...one would never mention it to others, oh no, but I have known, since I was a child, that the same power that dwells in a man must dwell in a woman. After all, it is we who give birth to men, so it has to be within us also, yes? It only makes sense, yes? But of course, one could never say, even in the company of other women who have been taught so well to believe otherwise.

I would never have considered or desired it, this enlightenment. For years, it was said that Buddha lived long ago and if I were to attain Buddhahood at all it would be possible only if I were reborn as a man. But then, many things don't make sense and the older I get the less it matters what others think. I know what I know.

I cannot go to see the Daishonin. Now I am in my eighties, and here on the isolated island of Sado my walk is stiff, and there are the animals to tend, my small orchard to prune, the daily things of life that claim me.

And it is so far to where he dwells. I would have to ride many days in a small, leaky boat, chance being smashed upon the rocks in a storm, walk many miles over mountains where bandits and evil men lie in wait for the foolish, the weak and the unwary.

But I know he is there. Once every few months, his messages come. It is a wondrous thing, how these messages get to us. A fisherman, smelly and old, climbs the rocky path to our door, to hand us a small scroll wrapped in oiled cloth, bound with an old fishing skein to keep it dry. Or one of his disciples, on a special journey, stops in for a bowl of rice and pickles, digs deeply into his pack and lo, there is a length of hollow bamboo sealed with tallow and string.

We wait until it is dark, our lamp lit, our tea bowls steaming after dinner. My husband's eyes are weak, so it is I who smoothes the stiffened scroll, using small beach stones to weight the corners and bend forward to peer at the calligraphy.

Many times when he lived on Sado I brought him paper. It was such a treasure for him. What little I could provide him with in this stark place, I did...a flask of rice wine to warm him, a basket of apples. He was always so grateful.

One time, approaching his hut in the field where he lived, I heard him heartily laughing. He had been trying to drink his tea and was having difficulty picking up the cup with his cold fingers. The front of his robe was wet with tea and he happily took the paper I had saved for him, saying it was good that winter always turns to spring and his writing would have to wait until then when his fingers could cooperate with the brush.

It was from this unusual man in our midst here on Sado that I learned that women could become enlightened too. Imagine my profound astonishment to hear this. It was as if he had said that humans would walk one day on the face of the moon. And although the idea of enlightenment made perfect sense, still it seemed as out of reach as the moon. From the first moment I began to chant the

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phrase he taught us, everything became possible.

When he left, his exile over, I bowed low, tried hard to blot my tears with my sleeve before he could see them. He was like our father, going away for good. I patted the horse's muzzle, my husband checking the belongings strapped to the horse's rump and I knew I would never see him again in this life. My feet would not follow, my life, a woman's life on a remote island, too deeply set. "Though you remain in Sado, your heart has come to this province," the letter said.

That day, I watched him leave, my husband and I waving good-bye, and then he was gone down the hillside, to the shore and the mainland of Japan, eventually to another little hut on the side of Mount Minobu.

So, I sent my husband, three times, laden with gifts, a habit I couldn't break, never knowing when or if my husband would return. Later, I rolled up the scroll in its oiled cloth and placed it in a chest with the others. I think about my life, so small it has been, and yet it has been touched by someone great, and that greatness has been ignited in me. And I still have my husband, a miracle in these times when men are as expendable as stalks of grass. Soon death will come to claim us. I am a simple woman. But I know what I know.

I know the heart can dwell in two places at once, perhaps more. And in this *saha* world so filled with trouble and strife, we can choose to dwell at the same time at Eagle Peak.

So we sit this night on Sado, Buddhas together with him far away on Minobu. For after all, he has said, what matters is one's heart. □

Fay Hovey lives in the town of Haiku on the island of Maui, Hawaii. She is a published poet and essayist. "I've watched with interest and enthusiasm the evolution of Living Buddhism over the last few years. It has always been a deep desire for me to be able to contribute something. Our magazines, our newspapers greet us in our mail boxes, pulsing with life, connecting us to each other. In a similar fashion, the Daishonin's writings brought life, encouragement and clarification of Buddhist concepts to his followers."

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